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ABSTRACT

Research in linguistics (theoretical, sccio- and psycho-linguistics) on relative clause formation is reveiwed in order to determine the advisability of teaching this construction in English as a second language (ESL) classes. It is suggested that research on other constructions can lead to implications for teaching these constructions when there is sufficient convergence of research results. The following areas are surveyed and then related to certain principles of language learning and acquisition: (1) strategies of formation across languages; (2) use in oral/written and planned/unplanned speech in English; (3) acquisition in English as a first language; and (4) acquisition in English as a second language. Results suggest that certain types of relative clauses are easier to learn in a formal classroom situation, while others might be better acquired outside the classroom. Results also suggest that if relative clauses are to be taught, they should be taught only for certain purposes. (Author/AMH)

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Applying Research: Can and Should Relative Clauses Be Taught?

by Margaret M. Van Naerssen

I will not presume to give an absolute answer to the question in the title, but will suggest some guidelines, based on research, that you might follow in making your own decision. The title may suggest a rather narrow focus but my real purpose is to explore what research in linguistics (theoretical, socio- and psycholinguistics) has to say in general that might be useful to the ESL teachers, by using the research concerning the relative clause as an example. I feel that similar implications might be drawn from research on other structures. Some of what I say may be new to you; you may find yourself saying, "yes, of course, that's common sense; any English teach knows that!" Perhaps all this article will do will be to re-enforce, with scientific studies, what your intuition tells you, giving you more confidence in your own judgements. But I hope it will also illustrate how interesting and complex language learning/acquisition can be and suggest a few ways in which we, as ESL teachers, can provide the most appropriate and effective ESL classroom environment.

First, to make sure there is a common understanding of the relative clauses being discussed, I'd like to briefly reintroduce the relative clause.

Most older ESL texts do not seem to use the term relative clause, but refer to it by such terms as adjective clause or post-nominal modifier. Labels are then given these clauses based on what they modify in the main sentence. See the following sentences:

1. The man that I saw yesterday is over there.

   The relative clause "that I saw yesterday" modifies "the man" which is in the subject position of the main sentence "the man is over there."

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2. The boy was playing the game which he got for his birthday.

   The relative clause "which he got for his birthday" modifies "game" which is in the object position of the main sentence "The boy was playing the game."

Now I will ask you to change your perspective: look at the grammatical structure of the relative clause itself in the following sentences:

3. She speaks alittle Italian which is her father's native language.

   The relative pronoun is in the subject position of the relative clause, or the noun phrase (NP), in the subject position, is being relativized on.

4. I saw the person that they chose.

   The relative pronoun is in the Direct Object position of the relative clause, or the NP, in the Direct Object position, is being relativized on.

5. I saw the boy that Paul sold the book to.

   The relative pronoun is in the Indirect Object position in the relative clause, or the NP, in the Indirect Object position, is being relativized on.

6. Individuality is a difficult thing to find here among the people that I am familiar with.

   The relative pronoun is in the Oblique position (object of a preposition other than indirect object and genitive); or the NP, in the Oblique position, is being relativized on.

7. Carolyn is a freshman from Gardena whose major right now is communications.

   The relative pronoun is a Genitive (possessive) and is part of the subject of the relative clause; or the Genitive, in the subject position, is being relativized on.

   I saw the man whose house Mrs. Jackson sold.

   The relative pronoun is a Genitive (possessive) and is part of the direct object of the relative clause; or the Genitive, in the direct object position, being relativized on.

8. Fred goes with the girl who Judy is taller than. (Object of Comparison)

   The relative pronoun is the Object of Comparison position of the relative clause position; or the NP, in the Object of Comparison position, is being relativized on.

Two linguists, Edward Keenan and Bernard Comrie, who are especially interested in looking for universals among languages, have done some research on relative clause formation in 49 languages. Such researchers realize that there are probably few absolute statements one can say are true of every language. However, they are looking for what the most common tendencies among languages are and are trying to understand why these are most common. What is there about the human mind, about social interactions, etc. that cause certain tendencies to be most common? For relative clauses they found that languages vary with respect to the NP positions that can be relativized--but this variation is not random. They then proposed a pattern which they called the Accessibility Hierarchy.

SU > DO > IO > OBL > GEN > O COMP

> Subject position NPs are more accessible (probably easier) to relativize than those in Direct Object positions; NPs in Direct Object positions easier than those in Indirect Object positions; those in Indirect Object positions easier than those in Oblique positions; those in Oblique positions easier than those in the Genitive position; Genitives easier than those in the Object of Comparison position.

Not all languages distinguish all of these grammatical categories.

Keenan/Comrie then proposed some conditions (or constraints):

1. A language must be able to relativize on subjects.
2. Any RC forming strategy must apply to a continuous segment of the AH (can't skip).
3. Strategies that apply at one point of the AH may in principle cease to apply at any lower point.

They note that languages may have more than one strategy for forming relative clauses.

In the following chart are eleven examples from Keenan/ Comrie's study of how relative clauses are formed.

Selected Relative Clause Formation Strategies from Keenan/Comrie

Language Relative Clause Forming Strategy	SU	D.O.	I.O.	OBL.	GEN.	O COMP
1. Arabic (Classical)						
1) postnom, -case	+	-	-	-	-	-
2) postnom, +case	-	+	+	+	+	+
2. Chinese (spoken Pekingese)						
1) prenom, -case	+	+	-	-	-	-
2) prenom, +case	-	+	+	+	+	+
3. English						
1) postnom, -case	+	+	-	-	-	-
2) postnom, +case	-	-	+	+	+	+
4. French						
1) postnom, +case	+	+	+	+	+	-
5. German						
1) postnom, -case	+	+	+	+	+	-
2) postnom, +case	+	-	-	-	-	-
6. Hausa						
1) postnom, -case	+	+	-	-	-	
2) postnom, +case	-	-	+	+	+	
7. Japanese						
1) prenom, -case	+	+	+	+/-	+/-	-?
2) prenom, +case	-	-	-	-	+/-	-?
8. Korean						
1) prenom, -case	+	+	+	+	-	-
2) prenom, +case	-	-	-	-	+	-
9. Persian						
1) postnom, -case	+	+	-	-	-	*
2) postnom, +case	-	+	+	+	+	*
10. Spanish						
1) postnom, -case	+	+	+	-	-	-
2) postnom, +case	-	-	-	+	+	-
11. Tagalog						
1) postnom, -case	+	-	-	-	-	-
1) prenom, -case	+	-	-	-	-	-

Key: * This position does not exist but is encoded by another category.
+ means that the strategy generally applies to that NP position
- means it does not
-? means it does not apply although the result is not judged too bad by informants

These strategies and those for 38 other languages can be found in: Keenan, Edward L. and Bernard Comrie. "Noun Phrase Accessibility and Universal Grammar." Linguistic Inquiry Vol. 8, No. Winter 1977, pp. 63-99. (An earlier version was written in 1972.)

Let us look briefly at the English example.

English	SU	DO	IO	OBL	GEN	O COMP
1) Postnom, -case	+	+	-	-	-	-
2) Postnom, +case	-	-	+	+	+	+

Postnominal means the relative pronoun follows the noun being modified. The case description assumes a dialect of English in which whom is not used; who is used for Direct Objects and after prepositions; whom is not obligatory for the Direct Object. If whom were used, the + for DO would be moved down to the + case strategy. While the case markings may not be clear to non-linguists, what is important to note is that the two strategies do follow the conditions Keenan/Comrie proposed. The other languages are for reference in case you wonder what strategies some of your students use in their native languages.

Keenan/Comrie's study was primarily based on asking native speakers to provide specific types of structures; then they tested out various possibilities. But how relevant to real language usage is all of this?

First let us look at acquisition.

Menyuk (1971) observes that the first appearance of some types of relative clause constructions seem to be characteristic of the language acquisition (at least in English-speaking children) of the pre-school age starting about 3 years or just under. This would put the beginnings of relative clause formation at about the midpoint in the acquisition process in terms of acquiring the basic structures of English.

Comprehension of relative clauses by children has been tested by a number of studies and the results basically support Keenan/Comrie's hypothesis: that is, the relative clauses that are the

easiest to understand/process are the highest on the hierarchy. (Not all of these studies were designed to test this particular hypothesis: Brown, 1971; Cook, 1975; Keenan/Hawkins, 1974; Legum, 1975; Valli, 1972 cited in Keenan/Comrie, 1977.)

According to an NCTE Research Report (cited in Menyuk, 1969) on the syntax of school-age children, relative clauses, though learned, tend to be avoided or substituted for by reduced relative clauses or other structures at a later stage. The relative clause is more frequently used by kindergarten children than by 7th graders!

Now let's look at adult usage of relative clauses.

Elinor Ochs Keenan suggests that "adult speech behavior takes on many of the characteristics of child language when communication is spontaneous and relatively unpredictable." (1977) This includes relying on earlier acquired structures more than the later acquired ones.

In a study of the differences between relatively planned and unplanned speech by native English speaking college students (van Naerssen, 1977) it was found that

1. In planned speech (where students had a chance to think ahead of time) there was a significantly higher number of relative clauses than in unplanned speech.
2. That generally the more difficult types of relative clauses (lower on the hierarchy) were found in higher proportions in planned speech than in unplanned speech.

Now let us compare written to spoken English. Barbara Kroll (1977) found that written narratives (relatively more planned than spoken narratives) contained a significantly higher percentage of subordinate structures, including relative clauses than the spoken narratives did. Of the subordinate types of constructions in

written narratives 32% were relative clauses; in the spoken only 12%.

A comprehension study (Cook, 19[illegible]) of relative clauses by adults also supports Keenan/Comrie's hierarchy.

You are perhaps thinking, "but these studies are on native speakers of English, not second/foreign language learners." But should we demand more of second language learners than is normal usage by native speakers? (And maybe some of you may say "yes" in order for students to compensate for having an accent, to cover up for being a second language speaker. But given the needs of ESL students in most classes, this goal is, in my opinion, a relatively lesser one.) Furthermore, Georgette Ioup (1976), in studying the use of relative clauses by adult ESL students, found that Keenan/Comrie's hierarchy was also valid in a second language setting.

Some researchers have also looked at other variables that might make some relative clause types easier to use than others. One such variable is that of non-interruption proposed by Slobin (1973) and tested out by Kuno (cited in Ioup, 1976) for relative clauses. Below is an example of an interruption with a relative clause; it has a center-embedded clause:

The man <u>that I saw yesterday</u> is over there.

The following is an example of non-interruption. The clause is said to be right branching:

The boy was playing the game <u>which he got for his birthday</u>.

A number of researchers argue that an interruption makes a sentence harder to <u>comprehend and produce</u> although one researcher, Sheldon (1974), did not find this supported significantly as a

variable for relative clauses with children. Still in the planned/unplanned speech study (van Naerssen, 1977), this principle of non-interruption was also tentatively supported.

Another principle studied by Sheldon (1974) is that of parallel function. This says that in a complex sentence if coreferential NPs have the same grammatical function as their respective clauses, then that sentence will be easier to process than one in which the coreferential NPs have different grammatical functions. Below is an example of a parallel pattern:

> I saw the person that they chose.
>
> Both person and that are in Object position.

The following is an example of a non-parallel pattern:

> She speaks alittle Italian which is her father's native language.
>
> Italian is in the object position and which is in the subject position.

Thus the second one should be easier to process than the first one. This principle of parallel function was also tentatively supported in the study of adult planned and unplanned speech. There were more non-parallel (presumably more difficult) patterned relative clauses in planned speech than in unplanned speech.

But what does all of this research have to say to ESL/EFL teachers? Can and should relative clauses be taught? First, the studies suggest that relative clause (RC) formation is a later acquired construction for native English speakers and that certain types of RCs are more difficult than others. If the decision is made, in developing ESL materials or in making lesson plans, to teach relative clause formation, the principles and variables discussed here probably should be taken into consideration, especially the

Accessibility Hierarchy as there also appears to be cross-language validity, suggesting something common about human cognition among a large number of languages. Also, as some researchers suggest (such as Burt/Dulay, d'Anglejan/Tucker and Krashen) adult second language acquisition tends to parallel first language acquisition for certain morphemes and structures in English. This tendency might also be taken into consideration in creating second language acquisition and learning situations.[1]

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[1] In a survey of 11 ESL textbooks/textbook series, I found that 9 treated relative clauses. Except for two (one of which focussed on writing) the average space devoted to relative clauses was only 2.2%, and in only two were relative clauses introduced earlier than half way through the book or series. There appears to be a tendency among the more recent textbooks to treat relative clauses that relativize primarily on positions on the upper end of the AH, probably reflecting a concern for developing materials that more closely match natural speech. These observations may reflect research based on relative clauses or they may reflect the developers' intuitions.

Thus, for conversational English, ESL teachers probably need not be concerned with teaching relative clauses. Probably only when helping students prepare for formal oral presentations and written compositions would it be especially useful to touch on RC formation and then on only RCs on the higher positions of the Accessibility Hierarchy as they will probably have very little use for <u>producing</u> ones on the lower end of the hierarchy. Maybe students need only be concerned with <u>comprehension</u> of types on the lower end of the hierarchy.

What I've just discussed assumes that you decide to teach relative clause formation. But Krashen et al. (1977) suggests that perhaps there are some morphemes, rules, or constructions that are too difficult, for a variety of reasons, to teach to many ESL students. Perhaps such rules, he suggests, can only be acquired by exposure to appropriate input. While we don't have

absolute proof that relative clause formation necessarily falls into this category, it does seem apparent that they are later acquired structures, and even children, once having acquired them, tend to avoid them at a later stage. An adult ESL student probably has the cognitive maturity to comprehend relative clauses better than a pre-school child acquiring a first language. However, it also seems apparent that even native English speaking adults tend to use relative clauses primarily when they have time to plan what they're going to say. Thus, relative clauses formation appears to be a likely candidate for Krashen's category of a construction that is "easier acquired than learned." And for your students who still want a rule, perhaps the simplest approach would be to use examples of relative clauses that relativize the subject position since all of your students will at least have a similar strategy in their own language, and you could make sure that the examples are right-branching for easier perception. And the rest can be left to acquisition as the other types are more difficult and are not that common anyway!

We need to heed the warning by Tarone, Swain and Fathman (1976) regarding going too fast with the interpretation of research results. But research results are worth at least considering especially when there is a convergence of tendencies from different research areas. The research on relative clauses appears to be one such case.

Perhaps when more research on other structures is compared similar suggestions can be made for teaching (or not teaching them). We also need to continue asking, as Olsen does, "Do English teachers really teach what English speakers really say?" [2]

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[2] Title of presentation given at the 1979 CATESOL State Conference, by Judy Winn-Bell Olsen. Los Angeles, California April 6-8, 1979.

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